

The Camera and the *Burqa*

by Martin Kramer

"The burqa is an abomination, that's understood, but it does not prevent one from thinking that it is also photogenic."

—Christophe Ayad, film critic¹

It was a mercifully short war, the campaign to drive the Taliban from their hold on power in Afghanistan—so short, in fact, that general knowledge of Afghanistan couldn't possibly keep pace with military operations. There was so much to digest: not just the Taliban regime, but Afghanistan's complex ethnic composition, its history of civil conflict, the loaded question of Islam, and the country's murky relations with Pakistan and the Arab world. It is at moments like this, when time is short and the subject is foreign, that documentary and foreign films attain an influence they never enjoy in peacetime.

The Western publics hungered for images from inside Afghanistan—and not just the Pentagon fare of exploding tanks and zapped convoys. In October, as soon as the "war against terror" entered its Afghan phase, television networks rushed to uncover the existing corpus of relevant films. Afghanistan has long appealed to a few adventurous filmmakers, and their work quickly began to fill television screens, engaging vast audiences that otherwise would not have given a moment of their time to a film on Afghanistan.

Inevitably, the films that received the most airtime and acclaim effectively served to justify the war. Large segments of public opinion needed reassurance that the war was not merely

an act of retribution for September 11 or a simple manhunt for Usama bin Ladin. They wanted to know that this war might also liberate the people of Afghanistan. But in this complex land of warlords and barons, who longed for liberation and from what? The two most influential films gave this answer: women, from the veil. When the history of the Afghan campaign is written, it should be (foot)noted that films played a significant role in rallying public opinion behind the idea of changing the regime in Kabul—not to eradicate terror but to liberate women from the *burqa*.

THEY SHOOT WOMEN

One image, more than any other, reinforced the American resolve that the Taliban had to go. It was a video segment filmed clandestinely in Kabul's football stadium, which the Taliban had turned into a site of public executions.

The stadium is full to capacity, and crowds of male spectators roam the field. Taliban executioners bring out a condemned woman in a pickup truck to the center of the field. She is in a full blue *chadari* (or *burqa*), enveloped in anonymity. She is made to kneel. A man in Taliban dress, brandishing an automatic weapon, approaches her from behind. He places the tip of

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¹ Christophe Ayad, "Kandahar manque sa cible," *Libération*, Oct. 17, 2001.



Execution in Kabul: "May be disturbing to some viewers."

the barrel to the back of her head and fires a shot right through it (we see a bit of dirt scatter on the ground in front of her). She collapses, dead, into a blue heap. A pickup truck pulls up to collect her body. Elsewhere on the field, condemned men hang from goalposts.

This grisly and sensational segment was the *pièce de résistance* of *Beneath the Veil*, a foray into Taliban-ruled Afghanistan by British television journalist Saira Shah.² She did not film the stadium scene herself; the clip was provided to her by an Afghan feminist organization. But it became the trademark of Shah's film, a documentary produced for Channel 4 in Britain in the spring of 2001 and first broadcast by CNN over the summer. On initial showing, *Beneath the Veil* stirred some mild interest. After the "war on terror" swept into Afghanistan, it became the world's most celebrated documentary film, broadcast in cycles by CNN. The public execution also became the immediately recognizable symbol of Taliban barbarism. On December 26, Shah appeared on "Larry King Live." "As we go to the break," intoned the host, "the famed shot

of the execution, don't go away."³ Americans didn't.

Beneath the Veil grabbed viewers' attention thanks to this shot seen 'round the world, and Shah did nothing to diminish its impact. Nowhere did she tell viewers what crime the condemned woman had committed (she beat her husband to death with a hammer while he slept). Nor did she say how frequently the

Taliban executed women in public (this was the first occurrence since their coming to power three years earlier).⁴ Nor did she point out that the Taliban were mimicking standard Saudi procedures for public executions, employed for the same range of crimes.⁵ Viewers thought they were witnessing a unique form of barbarism when they were not.

The unique barbarism of the Taliban fully expressed itself elsewhere, in the demolition of the giant Buddha statues at Bamiyan. This was an act of monumental vandalism, the cultural equivalent of September 11, quite possibly inspired by the same "Afghan Arabs." It was also captured on film. But the exploding Buddhas hardly moved America, whereas the shot to the head fascinated and appalled the entire country.

Why? To sum it up: the *burqa* factor. No

2 *Beneath the Veil* website, at <http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/presents/index.veil.html>.

3 At <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0112/26/lkl.00.html>.

4 Associated Press, Nov. 17, 1999.

5 In 1977, a teenaged Saudi princess, convicted of adultery, was executed in a Jidda parking lot, along with her lover (she was shot; he was beheaded). The story became the subject of dramatic reenactment in a 1980 PBS documentary, *Death of a Princess*. The response? Mobil Oil ran ads against the film, and the State Department tried to discourage PBS from broadcasting it. In the face of massive pressure, PBS showed the film only once. Steven Emerson, *The American House of Saud* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1985), pp. 159-60.

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one identified with the fate of the giant statues. But millions of Western viewers, especially women, immediately identified with the faceless and anonymous "victim" in the Kabul stadium. And could there have been a more potent symbol of oppression than the *chadari* (erroneously called a *burqa*)—a veil that conceals even the eyes of its "victims"?⁶ The *chadari* became the surrogate casus belli for many Americans who doubted the war's declared purpose of eradicating terror. *Beneath the Veil* broadened America's internal coalition by suggesting an alternative rationale for the fight: the liberation of Islam's most oppressed women. For that achievement, Shah truly deserves a medal. (She did go to Hollywood to collect the first "Courage under Fire Award" of the International Documentary Association.)

But *Beneath the Veil*, despite its obvious classification as a documentary film, wears the mantle uncomfortably. The reason: Shah is both the filmmaker and the film's subject; her own story is not just the subtext, it sometimes *is* the text. *Beneath the Veil* unfolds like a kind of Afghan *Perils of Pauline*, in which the heroine darts in and out of tight spots, each time gaining the upper hand over the turbaned bad guys. In fact, although the film is ostensibly a documentary, it has a plot, and it goes like this:

The heroine is a young Brit whose Afghan father, a famous sage, left his native country before her birth.⁷ She has been raised on his stories of beautiful pleasure gardens set like jewels amidst snow-capped peaks, a scene preserved in a yellowed photograph pinned over her bed. Now she is grown, her father is dead,

the long war has ended, and Afghanistan is in the grip of the bearded Taliban. She is asked to make a film about them, and the Afghan feminist

underground proposes to show her the suffering of the country's women. She assents, in the hope of seeing the idyllic gardens with her own eyes: "By hook or by crook, I would visit my family's lost homeland, a place called Paghman."⁸

The intrepid filmmaker enters Afghanistan with a small crew, equipped with an array of cameras large and small. Adventures ensue. She is booted out of Kandahar and detained by a Taliban patrol in Kabul. She dons a *chadari* to prowl the marketplace in search of the hungry. She slips into the sports stadium, like a pilgrim, to pay homage to the martyrs. She is secreted into a Kabul apartment where women apply makeup, to be worn beneath their veils. She is spirited off to a clandestine school where young girls learn to read in defiance of Taliban strictures against female education. Then she crosses the battle lines to join the good guys of the Northern Alliance (off with the *chadari*, in jeans now); they ferry her across a rushing river to see the grisly crime scenes of the Taliban. The emotional denouement: an encounter with three moist-eyed girls. Taliban fighters killed their mother before their eyes and probably raped them.⁹ In the film's finale, the heroine finally reaches Paghman, the site of the fabled gardens, only to find them in ruins.

HOLLYWOOD BOUND

It's a great story line, an adventure novel come to life. And its script probably was written

6 The *chadari* is the traditional Afghan veil, covering the eyes and nose with mesh. The *burqa*, which is less common, is a veil drawn across the face, leaving the eyes exposed.

7 Shah's father was the storyteller and Sufi guru Idries Shah, a half-Afghan who popularized a kind of de-Islamized Sufism suitable for Westerners looking for spiritual adventure. Her grandfather, Ikbāl Ali Shah, was a journalist, travel writer, and sometimes spy.

8 Saira Shah, "Land of My Father," *The Guardian*, June 26, 2001.

9 The film does not expressly report that the girls were raped, but Shah has written: "There was no doubt in my mind that they had been raped." Saira Shah, "A Personal Journey," at <http://www.channel4.com/life/microsites/A/afghanistan/journey1.html>.



The three girls found by Saira Shah.

even before Shah crossed the Afghan border. It was just a matter of harvesting the right footage—no problem given the lackadaisical approach of the Taliban to foreign journalists. (They only cared about the images Afghans might see; they remained almost totally indifferent to their own image abroad.) This is not to suggest that *Beneath the Veil* was staged, only that its makers set out to film those images that would flesh out a preconceived story line. And the most important preconception was this: the Taliban practiced what has been called “gender apartheid.”

It is important to be clear: Taliban oppression of women, especially the denial of education to girls, was barbaric. But its method was fairly haphazard. In an earlier issue of this journal, Michael Rubin recorded his own personal impressions of women under the Taliban, and they differ somewhat from the impressions left by *Beneath the Veil*. Public executions? “They are not conducted regularly and probably occur less frequently than in Iran and Saudi Arabia.” The *chadari*? “It is untrue that all women wear *burqas* all the time to cover themselves from head to foot. They do so largely in urban areas but, even in cities, older women and girls up to young teens show their faces.” Clandestine schools? “NGO-operated girls’ schools are not truly clandestine, as they are often described.” Rapes? They were common “before the Taliban disarmed gangs and warlords, including those

affiliated with the government then in power.”

Rubin’s conclusion: “The situation of women in Afghanistan is perhaps worse than it is anywhere in the Middle East (though Saudi Arabia and Yemen are close), and the Taliban should be confronted, but exaggeration allows the Taliban regime to dismiss all Western complaints as based on propaganda.”¹⁰ Physicians for Human Rights, who published a harsh report on the status of Afghan women in 1999, took

several steps back in their more thorough 2001 report, after they discovered that the Taliban applied their edicts unevenly, and the situation differed drastically from one locale to another. Interestingly, they found that 90 percent of the women in areas of Afghanistan not controlled by the Taliban wore the *chadari* anyway, and 82 percent of all surveyed Afghan women didn’t regard the Taliban dress code as an imposition.¹¹

But what possible interest could Shah have had in introducing this degree of nuance? Answer: none whatsoever. Hollywood celebrities, led by Mavis Leno (wife of “Tonight Show” host Jay Leno) had already launched a crusade for Afghan women back in 1997, raising feminist rage to a fever pitch.¹² And so Shah made a film with a touch of Hollywood. Of course, in turning her hidden cameras on the not-so-secret plight of Afghan women, Shah missed the real story: the way the Taliban had merged with the “Afghan Arabs,” to create something that did constitute a unique evil. The truly big development in the

10 Michael Rubin, “Afghanistan: As Bad as Its Reputation?,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Sept. 2000, pp. 55-66.

11 Physicians for Human Rights, “Women’s Health and Human Rights in Afghanistan: A Population-Based Assessment,” at http://www.phrusa.org/campaigns/afghanistan/Afghan_report_toc.html.

12 *The Washington Post*, Mar. 30, 1999.

Kandahar achieved in continental Europe what *Beneath the Veil* achieved in America and Britain: it rallied skeptics behind the war.

Taliban's later years was its growing dependence on cadres of foreign Muslim mercenaries—Arabs, Pakistanis, Chechens, you name it—under the command of Usama bin Ladin.

Rubin, for one, detected their belligerent presence on the streets of every city. Going after that story would have been far more dangerous and much more important.

But who cared about it before September 11? Shah settled for the lesser story, the easier shoot, delivering a *burqa* film that hit the high emotional notes at precisely the right time, through a perfect combination of sentimentality, false drama, and feigned danger. And a good thing, too: *Beneath the Veil* was invaluable war propaganda. Without its simple tale, the domestic coalition would have been much narrower.

It's just too bad she kept going. After the bombing campaign began, CNN asked for more, and Shah returned to Afghanistan to film a sequel, *Unholy War*.¹³ By this time, the dramatic tension had eased, so she built suspense on a crude foundation: this trip would be a quest to find those three sad girls, make sure they were safe, and get them into school—a happy ending. (Of course, the heroine first would have to surmount great obstacles: "Reaching them will be an epic journey, hundreds of miles. We'll have to dodge boarder patrols, travel on foot by night and cross one of the highest mountain ranges in the world—the Hindu Kush.")

That was the story line Shah planned when she set out from Pakistan. But the father of the girls hadn't seen the script: when Shah's crew turned up, he refused their offer of a house in another village close to a school. The girls would stay home—and out of the classroom. Shah finally hit bedrock: the Afghanistan that preceded

the Taliban, and that has outlasted them. "I assumed that I could solve their problems because I had good will and money. It taught me that their problems are more complex."¹⁴

The heroine learns a valuable lesson in life; run credits. *Unholy War* was anticlimactic and superfluous—but a useful reminder of why it was good that Shah stumbled upon complexity so late.

Alas, Shah's story will be flogged more thoroughly than a convicted drunkard in old Kandahar. She now has a contract to write her memoirs (at age 37), with the predictable title *Beneath the Veil*. Shah's agent sold them to Knopf for \$650,000, to Bertelsmann for \$470,000, to a British publisher for mid-six figures, and to the French publisher Laffont. Miramax bought the option to adapt the book to the silver screen, again for mid-six figures. The docudrama will not be difficult to script: it can rely largely on the drama-doc that millions have already seen. It could end up as the most successful commercialization of the "women in Islam" theme since Sally Field got stuck in Iran in *Not without My Daughter*. As Noël Coward said, "Ninety minutes is a long, long time."

IRANIAN TAKE

One other film fed America's *burqa* phobia: *Kandahar*, by the Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf.¹⁵ The film, set in Afghanistan and filmed in Iran among Afghan refugees, competed at Cannes in May 2001 without leaving much of an impression. But September 11 completely changed the fate of *Kandahar*. The film was rapidly sold for distribution in forty countries and ran through-

13 *Unholy War* website, at <http://edition.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/presents/index.unholywar.html>.

14 "Beneath the Veil Redux," at http://salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/11/16/veil_two/index.html.

15 *Kandahar* website, at <http://www.kandaharthemovie.com>.



Taliban women discover a smuggled book in Kandahar.

out continental Europe at the war's height.

Kandahar is a cinematic adaptation of the (partly) true story of an Afghan woman journalist living in Canada, whose sister writes from Kandahar that she has decided to kill herself before the next solar eclipse. The heroine travels to Iran, disguises herself in a *chadari*, and crosses the Afghan border in a race against the clock. On the road to Kandahar, she encounters an array of strange characters: a resourceful boy expelled from a Taliban Qur'anic school, a black American with a fake beard posing as a doctor, a clever con man who tricks aid workers. Each encounter is a lens through which some Taliban twist is brought into focus, such as the mad *madrasas* where boys study Qur'an and Kalashnikovs, and the edict that bans male doctors from physically examining women.

Makhmalbaf cannot do without the odd diversions into surrealism—most notably, a scene in which an aid aircraft drops artificial limbs by parachute, while amputees on crutches hobble desperately into the desert to retrieve them. But real life proved just as surreal: didn't American planes drop peanut butter and junk food? Perhaps a black American on the road to Kandahar was an artifice, but then how does one describe the real-life American who turned up in the Tali-

ban ranks in Kunduz?¹⁶ And Makhmalbaf ends the film abruptly, leaving the heroine somewhere outside Kandahar as the eclipse approaches—a hanging end, characteristic of many Iranian films. Makhmalbaf could not resist these Fellini-like touches (which, incidentally, earned for the film the "Fellini Honor" of UNESCO).

Yet *Kandahar* is a movie yearning to be a documentary. At some points, it overlaps *Beneath the Veil*, a documentary yearning to be

a movie. Both heroines are Afghan women journalists living in the West, who steal into Afghanistan in quests for persons or places left behind. Both keep journalists' tools under their *chadaris* (a camera in *Beneath the Veil*, a tape recorder in *Kandahar*), and both have brushes with danger, are detained briefly by the Taliban, and find dissidents who help them on their way. The documentary flavor of *Kandahar* is enhanced by Makhmalbaf's decision to cast Nilofour Pazira as his heroine, Nafas: she plays herself. It was Pazira who came to Iran in the hope of reaching a childhood friend in Kandahar, and Makhmalbaf took *Kandahar's* story line from her.¹⁷ Even now, despite her starring role, Pazira is quick to emphasize that she is a journalist, not an actress.

Ultimately, too, the message of the two films is identical: the Taliban practiced "gender apartheid." *Kandahar* achieved in continental Europe

16 After the film's release, it was reported that the black American actor, Hassan Tantai, was one David Belfield, the prime suspect in the Washington murder of a former Iranian diplomat in 1980.

17 *The New York Times*, Nov. 5, 2001.

what *Beyond the Veil* achieved in America and Britain: it rallied skeptics behind the war. There were many reasons why *Kandahar* should appeal so strongly to Europeans, most notably its Iranian provenance (untainted by American hands), and its strong aesthetics (in Italy, *Kandahar* set box office records). It did not premiere commercially in the United States until December 14—too late for the war, but not too late to refresh the message of *Beneath the Veil* with vivid new imagery.

It is the ultimate *burqa* film. Each scene underscores some other aspect of the veil's oppressive effect, even while making the most of its cinematic potential. In one early scene, families of Afghan refugees about to be repatriated from Iran are photographed for the record: absurdly, the wives pose for these identity photographs in the total anonymity of the *chadari*. In another scene, two women huddle beneath their *chadaris*, sharing a mirror and makeup. There is no aspect of the *chadari*, practical or aesthetic, that *Kandahar* does not explore.

Now no one should doubt Makhmalbaf's understanding of Afghanistan's political complexities. He has written a long, powerful, and unsparing essay about how indifference—not just that of the United States, but of Iran—produced the misery and suffering that enveloped Afghanistan.¹⁸ *Kandahar* operates on many more levels than *Beneath the Veil*, and it is fundamentally more interesting because it also plays into Iran's debate over the role of women in an Islamic society. (The film did play in Tehran.) But does *Kandahar* reflect any profound understanding of the problem of gender in Afghanistan? Makhmalbaf told Pazira that she was the first Afghan woman he had ever met. We



Before the fame: Makhmalbaf (right) and Nilofour Pazira at Cannes.

don't meet many in *Kandahar*, either (this is where *Beneath the Veil* has a clear advantage). Instead, we are given *burqas* of every shape and color and a series of developed male characters. In this sense, French film critic Christophe Ayad is right: *Kandahar* conveys a simple message, bordering on the simplistic. As such, it was useful in war—and potentially misleading in war's aftermath.

SWATCH OF MESH

Now that the military operations in Afghanistan are over, the West is learning two painful truths about the *chadari*.

First, it remains ubiquitous throughout Afghanistan. If it were the outcome of Taliban-imposed "gender apartheid," we should have witnessed some women casting it off, just as men shaved their beards. But the role of the *chadari*, and the dilemma of gender relations in Afghanistan, are much more complex than the West has been led to assume from mass exposure to these two films.

It won't be easy to correct first impressions. *Burqa*-eradication is immensely popular in the United States. In February 2001, some 18,000 persons attended a gala performance of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* in Madison Square Garden, where Oprah Winfrey read the Ensler monologue "Under the *Burqa*." As she

18 Mohsen Makhmalbaf, "The Buddha Was Not Demolished in Afghanistan; He Collapsed out of Shame," at <http://www.kandaharthemovie.com/article/article01.htm>.

finished, an Afghan feminist emerged on stage in a tent-like *chadari*—which she then discarded. It was a scene reminiscent of the great missionary spectacles

of nineteenth-century London. There have been traveling exhibits, where school children are given a *chadari* to try on. You can buy blue “*burqua* swatches” from one of the most militant of the “gender apartheid” campaigners, the Feminist Majority. “This swatch of mesh represents the obstructed view of the world for an entire nation of women who were once free.”¹⁹ But when were they “free”? Is a woman in a *chadari* by definition not free? Is the eradication of the *chadari* a desirable, feasible, or even legitimate aim of the West? In Afghanistan, things are never as simple as they seem. Is there

Under the Taliban, the *chadari* concealed cameras; under the new regime, it could be concealing terrorists.

a filmmaker up to the challenge?

Second, the sheer ubiquitousness of the *chadari* is probably the greatest asset of al-

Qa'ida's leaders who are still on the run. In *Kandahar*, the heroine's male guide dons a *chadari* as a disguise. He is found out, but Usama bin Ladin himself could stroll through downtown Kabul in just this way—undetected and unchallenged. Afghanistan remains the perfect hideout because half of the people go about their public business in disguised anonymity. This will not change soon; it may never change. Under the Taliban, the *chadari* concealed cameras; under the new regime, it could be concealing terrorists. So get your “*burqua* swatches” now, while they still symbolize the battle against the bad guys. After all, the *chadari*, being Afghan, may switch sides.

¹⁹ Feminist Online Store, at <http://www.feminist.org/store/ProductGift.asp>.

